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Damage Assessment Assumes Worst

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WASHINGTON

THE grim routine is the same in every spy case. Even before the arrests are announced, a team of intelligence analysts begins pondering a question that can never be answered with certainty: "How much damage was done?"

These studies, which the trade calls "damage assessments," are often a trip through one of the intelligence world's mind-bending halls of mirrors. With the discovery of a spy or a listening device, analysts re-examine years of events from the perspective that the other side was peeking at cards thought to have been held close to the chest. Intelligence officials acknowledge that it is more of an art than a science.

Last week, the analysts were hard at work on the case involving the Marine Corps guards in Moscow, three of whom have been arrested, two of them charged with espionage. At week's end, the case appeared to be widening as two more former guards came under suspicion of fraternizing with Soviet women, a practice that is prohibited because of concern that sexual encounters could lead to spying.

It may take the analysts months or even years to understand the extent of the harm, as they try to determine what actually happened at the American Embassy in Moscow. One of the problems is the testimony of the marines. Sgt. Clayton J. Lonetree gave investigators a statement about his espionage activities that was filled with contradictions. Another, Cpl. Arnold Bracy, told authorities he let Soviet agents into the embassy. He later recanted, according to William Kunstler, a lawyer for Sergeant Lonetree.

As they try to sort out the facts, the analysts are proceeding with a worst-case scenario that assumes everything available to an accused spy has been given to his handlers. "We operate on the principle that when in doubt, assume it's compromised," said Robert Lamb, the Assistant Secretary who heads the State Department's Bureau of Diplomatic Security. What that means in the case of the marine guards is that analysts must suspect Soviet agents had access to every secure area in the embassy, including the communications room where sensitive material was encoded and sent out. Soviet agents, officials presume, were thus able since 1985 to read every communication or document handled by the embassy, including those on American positions in arms control talks or who the Central Intelligence Agency had recruited in Moscow.

The analysts will refine the picture as more evidence emerges. They will ask such questions as: Were there systems that the Soviet agents couldn't possibly have had access to because of the marines' work schedules or embassy procedures? Are there things that were seen by Soviet agents, but likely not understood? Could the marines have gotten into files or areas outside their normal job assignment?

In the marines' case, as in any other, the analysts are hampered by the inability to know with certainty what material was passed to a hostile intelligence service. One way to find out is to ask the spy, and that is one reason why the intelligence agencies encourage prosecutors to offer defendants more lenient sentences in exchange for precise information. An Administration official said that Frank C. Carlucci, the National Security Adviser, had raised this possibility about the marines' case last week at a meeting with the Justice Department. The idea was rejected.

In the case of the convicted naval intelligence analyst, Jonathan Jay Pollard, the officials assessing the damage of his spying got an unusual boost when the Israeli Government, who employed Mr. Pollard, returned documents that he had stolen. Some intelligence experts assumed, however, that the Israelis would have withheld any material that was still useful to them.

Analysts' Problems

There is a danger, when assessing spy cases, of attributing too much to a single breach, just as police officers are sometimes inclined to use the confession of a mass murderer to clear their books of all unsolved cases. Just last year, for instance, the intelligence analysts were attributing many of the troubles that had befallen the Moscow station to Edward Lee Howard, a former C.I.A. officer who secretly provided Soviet agents with details of the agency's operations. Now, the suspicion is that some instances in which networks were rolled up, and diplomats expelled may be linked to the breaches caused by the Marine guards.

One aspect of the case that disturbs analysts is that even if the marines cooperate, they may never be able to know for sure how successful the Soviet agents were in opening safes and planting eavesdropping devices.

One possible way to find out would be if a Soviet intelligence officer defected. Even that scenario, however, is fraught with problems. Just last year, a K.G.B. officer named Vitaly Yurchenko defected, and told analysts of the tremendous benefits the Soviet Union reaped from the activities of John A. Walker, the former Navy officer convicted of spying. But Mr. Yurchenko abruptly returned to the Soviet Union, casting at least some doubt on his information and throwing another reflection onto the mirrors.

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